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Editorial

FAITH AND THE SCIENTIFIC MIND

The progress of science, but even more the spread and development of the scientific spirit, are constantly forcing upon religion new and difficult questions and constantly raising anew the question whether faith and the scientific mind can live together. If not it will soon come to pass that between the intellectual forces of the world and the religion of the world there will be a great gulf fixed over which none will pass from either side. On the one hand, from the attitude of mind which science has created there will be no retreat but only advance; and on the other, the human heart's need of religion makes it certain that however it may change its form religion will never die. The only question is whether religion and science will live together or dwell apart in separate and hostile camps.

Let it be laid down in the first place that faith and the scientific spirit will not dwell together by virtue of skilfully framed compromises. A scientific man may confine himself so far as his science is concerned to chemistry and physics, and maintain undisturbed his allegiance to an inherited creed, unaware of any conflict between them. But while this may happen in an individual case, it cannot be true in the large. The scientific spirit is not a thing that belongs to the realm of so-called science in the narrower sense. It is an attitude of mind that once fully adopted inevitably concerns itself with every phase of life and thought. And faith is not less inclusive in its scope. The unthinking or narrow-minded man may define his faith as consisting in his acceptance of certain propositions that have to do with one side of his life. But if he ever

escapes from the narrowness of his life, intellectually or religiously, he will discover that his faith must concern itself with the whole range of his thought and life. Not only does the scientific spirit, when once it possesses a man, pervade every aspect of that life; faith also is like leaven and leavens the whole life.

It must be evident therefore that the scientific spirit cannot live with a faith that is defined in terms of fixed creed and authority. If one's faith means the steadfast maintenance of beliefs because and only because they are held and proclaimed by the church or any branch of it, then the coming of the scientific mind means the going out of faith. For the scientific spirit means that one resolutely faces all the facts and as resolutely accepts the legitimate deductions from those facts, and such a spirit is in direct conflict with the acceptance of dogmas on authority.

But it must be admitted not only that the scientific spirit involves the acceptance of a principle which is in conflict with that of authoritative tradition; it usually means also the actual discovery of errors in those beliefs that have been traditionally held. The historical study of the last century, which has come more and more under the domination of the genuinely scientific spirit and has therefore more and more resolutely sought to face all the facts, has unquestionably compelled the abandonment of many old opinions and made not a few others impossible any longer of confident affirmation. True, many hypotheses have been put forward only to be abandoned, and many that now enjoy a certain favor with scholars may prove untenable. But it cannot be denied that in many matters hypothesis has been the stepping-stone to a certainty far more certain than anything that preceded the hypothesis. We have changed, we must change, many of the beliefs that were once held respecting the way in which the world came to be, the origin of the race, the development of the Old Testament religion, the authority of prophets and apostles.

It is not strange then that many ask with concern, How far is this process to go, and what is to be its outcome? For it is not in the realm of historical fact only that the scientific mind becomes tangent with the realm of faith. We may surrender the historicity of the story of Jonah; we may consent to the multiple authorship

of the prophecies ascribed to Isaiah; we may come to admit the existence of unhistorical elements in the gospels and of doctrinal misapprehensions in Paul. But we shall also have to face the question of the immortality of the soul, the nature of the soul itself, and even of the basis and security of our belief in God. The child takes—and ought to take—many things on testimony. But the scientific mind puts away childish things, and little by little, but relentlessly, demands the ground of every assertion. Does its prevalence then mean an all-inclusive agnosticism in religion?

Two answers are to be made to this question, for our religious faith concerns itself with two distinguishable fields of thought. In the one, science is possible; the other is beyond the reach of science in the exact sense of the word. The boundary between these two fields is not the same for all persons, or for all periods. It is constantly changing with the progress of science. But it always exists.

First, then, as concerns the sphere in which science is possible, it must be recognized that all knowledge consists of verified hypotheses. Nothing is known directly. In every realm we accept that which accredits itself by the fact that it corresponds to and explains experience and that its acceptance makes for the harmonious development of experience. Science objectively speaking is simply the body of such verified hypotheses. This is as true in the realm of things with which religion concerns itself as in every other, and no more so. We reach our conclusions about the Bible and its teachings, its origin, date, inspiration, and authority, as we reach conclusions in other realms. Achieved results in this field are no more open to the blight of skepticism, to the demand of agnosticism, than in any other. We are, indeed, more sensitive to the suggestion of the necessity of revising our opinions here than in physics and so-called secular history; and this sensitiveness sometimes leads to exaggeration and panic. But these are wholly unwarranted. There is no more occasion to surrender to the agnostic that portion of the realm of theological thought in which data may be gathered, and hypotheses set up, tested, and verified, than to yield chemistry to him or the history of Rome.

Nor is the result of this process impoverishing to religion. For

if some former hypotheses are abandoned or modified by scientific criticism, this apparent loss is offset by a twofold gain. On the one hand, those beliefs—and there are many such—that emerge unharmed from the fire of criticism are far more strongly established than before, and on the other hand, the critical process brings to light new elements which, positively valued and used, enrich our faith. We must count our gains as well as our losses, nor fail to include among the former that inspiration, uplift, and development that come from the courageous pursuit of truth.

In the second place, it is most important to remember that in every realm of life there is and must probably always remain a broad penumbral band surrounding the area of scientifically ascertained fact. There are immense tracts which science has not entered; perhaps they can never be entered; at any rate for an indefinite time to come, whatever progress science may make, its enlarging circumference will be but the vaguely defined inner boundary of the realm it has not touched. But this realm is not remote from human life and experience. Untouched by science, we ourselves touch it every hour; and touch it in things that are most intimate and precious to us. And here it is that faith has, not, indeed, its only, but perhaps its most important, task. And this is true, not in respect of religion only, but in every phase of life. By what scientific test can the youth prove that the friend to whom his soul is drawn is worthy of his love and trust? Yet the great friendships of life are formed in youth, and the great decisions of life are made in youth, and wisdom is not with him who will not venture without demonstrative proof, but with him who, trusting the world and the voice of his own soul, makes the noble adventure. How can it be scientifically established that life is worth the living? But the world is well agreed that he who shirks life for lack of evidence that it is worth the living, or even in the face of much evidence that it is not so, proves himself a coward and a fool. And what if the study of the history of religions shows us that men have always made their gods of that which was at their hand, be it gold or silver, wood or clay, and that they have always blundered, sometimes more, sometimes less, as they have framed their conception of God after the analogy of the beasts about them, or the kings that ruled over them, or the man they found within

them? And what if, with the ever-enlarging vision of the universe which geology, astronomy, and all their sister-sciences have been giving us, God has become so infinitely larger than even he whom the philosopher once called the Infinite and Absolute, that the thoughtful man finds it difficult to keep him confined within the limits of any creed or ritual? What if man in proportion as he becomes scientific is compelled to put away the childish things that were so easy to handle, and to grapple with things that grow ever bigger and tend constantly to escape beyond the limits of his thought? Doubtless what happens in many cases is that the thinker grows weary of the effort to adjust himself to the enlargement of his own horizon, and takes refuge either in the more comfortable conceptions of his intellectual childhood, or in easy though benumbing agnosticism. But what ought to follow is not this, but the conscious, deliberate, joyous adventure of faith, the appropriation to oneself from out of the realm where science has not gone, and perhaps never can go, of that conception of things, and of that faith in the God of the human soul and of human life, which brings courage to the soul and inspiration into life. Such faith science neither contradicts nor forbids. It is in a sense ultra-scientific. In a larger sense it is in the highest measure scientific. Indeed it is only by virtue of a similar faith that science itself exists. And when science has reached its limits, which are by no means the limits of life or its needs, it is but rational, it is really scientific, to shape one's further course by the faith and hope which are justified by the tests of human life, though those tests necessarily lack the accuracy and definiteness necessary to bring them within the field of science in the stricter sense. This is what we do in business, this is what we do in friendship and love; in fact in all the affairs of life. Without the adventure of courageous faith life would be stale and dull indeed. It is irrational to make this adventure everywhere else and refuse it in religion.

Faith and the scientific mind are inconsistent if faith be narrow and unbelieving, or if science unscientifically set limits to thought and life. But if the scientific mind accepts all its larger implications, and if faith has the breadth and courage that properly belong to it, not only can they dwell together—they contribute each to the development of the other.